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**Focus group methodology in a life course approach - individual accounts within a peer cohort group**

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## **Focus group methodology in a life course approach – individual accounts within a peer cohort group**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the use of focus group methodology as part of a life course approach building on Julia Brannen's pioneering work in these two areas. Much life course research uses individual interviews, including biographical interview techniques. It is less usual to find focus groups used within the life course perspective. This paper draws on a PhD study of young British and Asian adults' experiences of the transition from university to full-time employment, using focus groups as part of a multi-method approach, within a life course perspective. The study drew explicitly on Julia Brannen's approach to life course transitions. Three focus group excerpts are presented and discussed to illustrate how focus group data can further understanding of the ways in which a group of peers discusses the transition to work and especially future work-life balance. We show how focus group discussions about individual choice for future work and "life" or "lifestyle" can highlight shared assumptions of this birth cohort group as well as areas of disagreement and contention, rooted in both individual experiences and societal and socio-cultural expectations. We relate this to Julia Brannen's conceptualisation of the three different modalities which young people draw on to talk about the future.

**Keywords:** life course approach, focus group methodology, transitions, adulthood.

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on two areas of Julia Brannen's research which we consider particularly influential for work-life research – focus group methodology and the life course approach. The work-life research field, like much applied research, is often dominated by policy change and organisational requirements. Julia's development of research methods within this field has been critical in increasing the rigour and quality of research.

We explore here the use of focus group methodology as part of a life course approach for studying university graduates who are about to enter full-time employment. This builds on Julia's pioneering methodological developments. Two of the authors of the present paper (Sue and Janet) worked closely with Julia on a number of projects and related publications using these approaches, between 1996 and 2013. The first author in the present paper (Uracha) did not work directly with Julia but her PhD was inspired by Julia's many publications on methodology and life course. This paper draws on focus group data from Uracha's PhD as an example of the impact of Julia's work in this field. The PhD was particularly influenced by a study of the transition to adulthood, which used focus groups to encourage young adults (aged 18-30) in five European country contexts to reflect on their future lives particularly in relation to employment and family (Lewis, Smithson, Brannen, das Dores Guerreiro, Kugelberg Nilsen, & O'Connor, 1998; Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen and Smithson, 2002). The use of focus groups in this study was partly related to the small amount of funding available for a cross-national study. Nevertheless Julia, who took the lead on research design in all our collaborative projects, developed this method as a strength, generating important insights into the impacts of layers of contexts on the ways in which young Europeans talked about future work and family within focus group interactions (Brannen and Smithson, 1998; Lewis, Smithson and Brannen, 1999; Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; 2005; Brannen and Pattman, 2005; Lewis and Smithson 2001). This methodology was developed in a number of other further projects culminating in "Transitions", a study of the transition to parenthood in seven European countries (Lewis and Smithson, 2005 Brannen, Nilsen and Lewis, 2009; Nilsen; Brannen and Nilsen, 2012). "Transitions" included focus groups with young parents as part of a multi-method design which also encompassed in-depth context mapping, biographical interviews and life lines to explore experiences of life course transitions within organisational case studies and a comparative cross-national framework. Never one to shy away from the challenges of complexity, Julia continues to push the boundaries of innovative research strategies, methodologies and theorising on the life course. Julia has been an inspirational colleague and mentor and her focus on methodological rigour and insistence on high standards of analysis have been central to our understanding of how to conduct and write about applied feminist research without compromising on theoretical and methodological concerns.

Despite the research discussed above, it remains relatively rare to find focus groups used within the life course perspective. Qualitative life course research typically utilises an individual interview approach, often employing biographical interview techniques (see Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Nilsen, Brannen and Lewis 2012). Biographical interviews take account of temporal aspects of individuals' life story narratives which are interpreted in relation the layers of context within which lives unfold (Brannen and Nilsen, 2012). Focus groups would not normally be considered appropriate for generating life story narratives, as such. Nevertheless, in this paper we build on Julia's work to further demonstrate that focus groups can be a useful method for exploring the ways in which members of a specific birth cohort talk about their hopes and expectations for the future.

Below, we first discuss aspects of life course theory, before discussing focus groups and how they can contribute to understandings of life course transitions. We then describe the PhD study and draw on three focus groups excerpts from the study to illustrate ways in which focus groups can illuminate generational and cultural narratives and norms during a life course transition, with analysis informed by Julia's methodological and theoretical insights.

### ***Key aspects of the life course approach***

Life course is defined as "a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time" (Giele and Elder, 1998: 22). Life course research studies people's individual lives (their trajectories and experiences) within a framework of reference to structural contexts and social change, paying explicit attention to the powerful connection between individual lives and the historical and socio-economic context in which lives unfold. People's lives are looked at processually in the context of the society in which they live, the structural characteristics of society at different times in their lives such as the gender and class structure, and also the size of the cohort to which they belong (Elder 1980; Riley 1988). Key concepts in a life course perspective include: age, cohort<sup>1</sup> and historical period; transitions and trajectories

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term cohort as distinct from generation as the latter is defined in multiple ways while birth or age cohort refers more specifically to a group born within a specific period of historical time (Nilsen et al., 2012).

and linked lives (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Nilsen et al, 2012). Crucially, the life course perspective elaborates the importance of time (historical and generational), context, process, and meaning on human development (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). Elder (1985) argues that time can be envisioned as a sequence of transitions which are individual yet contextually dependent. A *transition* is a discrete life change or event within a trajectory (e.g. from a single to married/cohabiting state), whereas a *trajectory* is a sequence of linked states within a conceptually defined range of behaviour or experience (e.g. education and occupational career). Transitions are often accompanied by socially shared ceremonies and rituals, such as a graduation or wedding ceremony, whereas a trajectory is a long-term pathway, with age-graded patterns of development in major social institutions such as education or family. In this way, the life course perspective emphasises the ways in which transitions, pathways, and trajectories are socially organised. Moreover, transitions typically result in a change in status, social identity, and role involvement. Trajectories, on the other hand, are long-term patterns of stability and change and can include multiple transitions. Transitions, then, are experienced as individual biographical events, yet firmly rooted in societal expectations, socio-cultural expectations, and historical events. Life course theory also highlights the importance of linked lives (Elder, 1994), that is, the interaction between the individual's social worlds across the life course, including kinship and other social relationships. Typically therefore, life course research focuses on individuals, using individual interviews or surveys, while taking historical and geographic context into account in acknowledgement of people's socially embedded lives, rather than generating group data. The work of Brannen and Nilsen, however, points to ways in which focus groups can help to understand the connections between layers of context and individual biography (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002, 2005, 2007)

### ***Focus groups within a life course approach***

One argument for using focus groups to consider life course transitions is to study in detail the ways that members of a specific cohort discuss their experiences and perceived choices. Individual interview methods provide a way of looking at individuals' stories from their own perspectives – their understandings of how their life course has been shaped by their own choices and experiences and by external

factors. However, in a life course approach, individuals' behaviour and decisions are also understood to be made in the social and cultural context of their time, location and historical experiences. Exactly how each birth cohort experiences the social and historical factors, and how these generational differences affect and are affected by personal biography and development, is not always clear. Focus groups may provide a link between the individual story accessed via individual biographical interviews and the cohort-wide experience of being of that age and social group at that point in time and place. Clearly however, there are also limitations to the use of focus groups in life course research. Some personal questions about individual life course experiences and expectations will be inappropriate in a group context, for both methodological and ethical reasons.

Focus group analysis typically pays attention to the discourses which are constructed within this context rather than just individual comments (Myers, 1998; Puchta and Potter, 2002; Stokoe and Smithson, 2002). A focus group methodology is particularly useful in life course research for exploring how discourses or themes are constructed jointly by participants in a group context, and how identity is collectively constructed (Munday, 2006). Focus group discussions range between discussion of personal experiences and collective experiences (Pini, 2002). This may provide an opportunity to consider how individuals' life course experiences and expectations for the future are related to individual and family expectations, and how far they are a collective experience for a particular cohort. For our analysis, we assume that people's attitudes and opinions are not fixed entities, but that people will justify their position differently in particular contexts. So, an account of an individual's life course experiences may be presented rather differently in individual interviews and group contexts. We can use a focus group methodology to study how people's experiences, opinions and expectations about their individual life course transitions are formed, elaborated on, and responded to in a peer group situation. There may be social pressures to agree in a group situation, but there are also opportunities to negotiate positions, challenge and develop one's own ideas.

**The study: The transition from university to employment - British and Asian students studying in the UK**

The PhD study we draw on focused on a specific life course transition. The aim was to explore the experiences, views, and expectations of a birth cohort of young women and men from different cultural and national contexts on issues relating to the transition from full-time university education into 'adulthood' (paid work, partnership, parenthood). The participants were 30 young adults who were nationals of Asian countries or Britain. They were all university students in Manchester, UK, in the final year of their studies and planning to enter the labour market within the next year. Within the Asian subgroup, 15 participants were from China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. There was also ethnic diversity in the British subgroup which included two second-generation British-Pakistani participants (one man and one woman) and one second-generation British-Chinese man. This composition reflected the national and ethnic diversity among the Manchester student population.

All 30 participants took part in an individual interview and 23 subsequently participated in one of four focus groups. Focus group composition was determined partly by availability, and not separated in terms of gender or nationality. Three groups included both Asian and British participants and one comprised all British participants. Although each group consisted of 'heterogeneous' participants based on gender and nationality, all were 'homogeneous' in their shared commonalities. They were university students studying in Manchester and were about to enter a transitional life course stage of completing their higher education and entering the labour market.

In the individual interviews, participants talked about their feelings about graduating from university and entering employment, their plans for and expectations of paid work, the meanings of work-life balance (WLB) in general and for them personally, in the immediate and distant future, and their expectations of WLB employer and state support. They discussed reasons for pursuing a degree, why they chose to study in the UK, their views on gender roles and norms at work and home, and the impact of education and upbringing on how they made sense of all these issues. The interview questions were designed to reflect the life course elements of human agency, location in time and place, linked lives, and timing of life events that intersect to shape young adults' accounts of their experiences, views, and expectations of



their transition into adulthood (Giele and Elder, 1998).

The focus groups took place several months after the interviews. They were used to feedback and discuss preliminary interview analysis and to generate peer group discussion on these topics. Focus group questions built on the interview discussions on WLB, expectations of WLB support, how gender affect their future working and personal lives, and future life plans in 5 and 10 years' time (paid work, partnership, parenthood). Participants were asked upon arrival to read a British newspaper article, reporting graduates' views on WLB in the UK. This served as an icebreaker, and the starting point for focus group discussion. Questions were framed to encourage participants to offer their views and opinions (e.g. "Some people don't feel entitled to WLB support from employers from the start, but do later on – why do you think that is?"). Questions were also designed to relate individual accounts to life course elements of linked lives, location in time and place, and timing (e.g. "Do you think your cultural background shapes your expectations for WLB?").

### ***Culture and context***

By including both British-born and Asian-born participants, the study explored how young adults' accounts relating to the transition into adulthood were influenced by their experiences in their country of origin and/or by their current experiences in Britain. The Asian participants were particularly interesting from a life course perspective as they were situated between two cultures and were negotiating a transition while living in two sets of social and familial contexts. Life course approaches take account of layers of context. Two aspects of context are particularly relevant to this study. First, in the present, all participants were students in the UK at a time with a prevailing discourse on WLB manifested in frequent newspaper articles, government discussions and emerging policy. These were mostly individualistic in nature and referring to either individual choices or policies supposedly intended to enhance such 'choices' (Smithson and Lewis, 2005). This discourse was not limited to the UK context and was increasingly becoming evident in non-western national contexts, often transposed via multinational company surveys and policies (Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006; Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007; Nilsen, Brannen and Lewis, 2012). Secondly, there were

differences in past life course experiences. While the British students' lives had unfolded with a context of growing national and European public debate about work and family during a period of increasing female labour force participation, the Asian students' early lives had unfolded in various countries, typically with emphasis on economic development and the need for hard work to establish nations as key competitors in the global economy (Larson, Wilson, and Rickman, 2009; Xiao and Cooke, 2012). This was not a conventional comparative cross-national study in that all participants were located in one national context at the time of the study. Yet, there were some elements of a comparative cross-national study, as participants could exchange, compare, and build on each other's accounts of cross-national and cross-cultural social comparisons. The focus groups were places in which some of the uncertainties and tensions in people's experiences and plans become normalised as part of the dual transition – the life course transition, and for the Asian students, the process of cultural transition as temporary migrant young adults. Thus the wider PhD study built on and extended in some respects the comparative qualitative cross-national and cross-cultural research methods developed by Julia and her colleagues.

### **Analytic focus: the link between individual accounts and cohort-wide experiences**

Focus groups are socially organised situations, where participants and moderators enter the setting under shared assumptions of performance (Brannen and Pattman, 2005). As such, accounts generated should be interpreted as constructed within this specific social situation and context. As with many other research methods, they are shaped by the interests of the researcher and the questions that are asked and by the participants' interpretations of the questions and their own interests (Brannen, 2012). WLB is a contested and ambiguous term (Lewis et al., 2007; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Moreover, most study participants were yet to experience full-time employment. The questions required participants to imagine future experiences of WLB and express hypothetical preferences and choices accordingly. In their study of young Europeans' future family and work-family, Brannen et al. (2002) contend that young people's beliefs about and responses to hypothetical situations must be interpreted in terms of the different modalities in which their responses are

positioned. Three different types of modality are specified: (1) normative accounts, where young people refer to the 'right thing to do' that relate to dominant public discourses and norms, often in the form of evaluation or argumentation; (2) personal accounts, in which they refer to their own experiences usually in report or narrative form; and (3) practical accounts, where they make references to practical considerations and again, are typically in report or narrative form. Brannen et al. (2002) caution against assuming simple correspondence of modalities between question and response, arguing that although young people make reference to general normative guidelines in their discussions of future hypothetical issues, they do not do so exclusively. Often, they relate general normative accounts to their own experiences and also draw on the experiences of people whose lives are linked to theirs, such as their parents, siblings, partners, and friends (Brannen et al., 2002). We illustrate these different modalities in the analysis below.

Below, we explore focus group discussions on a theme that emerged strongly in the individual interviews – 'choice' in relation to future WLB. Looking at how individual choice is discussed and constructed within a focus group context is interesting methodologically because the 'common sense' notion of choice itself implies that it is a personal matter and an individualistic issue which contrasts with the sociological understanding of constrained choices. This individualistic interpretation of individual choice is prevalent within the mainstream WLB discourse and implies that individuals are free to choose and control how to achieve this 'balance' (Gregory and Milner 2009). Yet this notion has been problematised as part of a wider debate about the interdependency between human agency and structure, the contexts and conditions under which individuals make (constrained) choices across the life course (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Lewis et al, 2007). Recent literature also draws a distinction between choice and capability in relation to WLB (Hobson 2011; Den Dulk et al, 2011; Peper et al, 2013). Attending to participants' talk about choice in focus groups enables exploration of shared assumptions of what is normative when it comes to individual transitions and how these accounts are constructed and contested by the young adults among their peers.

Thematic analysis was used for both interview and focus group data for the overall study (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, 2009). Here, we explore the construction of these

themes in the focus group data. We look at the ways that individual accounts are presented, modified and considered in the peer focus group context.

### ***Individual accounts and shared assumptions within a peer cohort group***

The theme of individual choice emerged strongly in participants' accounts in both individual interviews and focus groups. We present three focus group excerpts where participants talk about choices for future WLB, selected to illustrate the possibilities for focus groups as a method for exploring cohort and generational aspects of individual life course transitions.

#### ***1. Developing a personal account in the focus groups***

In the first excerpt, from the only focus group with all British participants, a discussion took place between three participants: Hritik (a 22-year-old British-Pakistani man, postgraduate diploma in legal practice), Frank (a 28-year-old white British man, final year PhD), and Megan (a 23-year-old white British woman, postgraduate certificate in education). One more participant, a 23-year-old white British woman PhD student, also took part, but was silent in this exchange.

The moderator asked "Did any of you make a conscious decision in terms of what you studied and base that decision on how you wanna lead your life in the future in terms of working hours?" Frank, Megan, and Caroline replied straightaway that it was not a conscious decision based on life plans. Hritik then described his choice to study law:

Hritik                    if there's any hope of me going somewhere in Hawaii [laughs] and having four holidays a year (...) It's just more of a lifestyle choice, which is why I did what I wanted to do. And yet, I think I'm like any of the other, you know, 600 in Manchester who are studying who want to be a lawyer I did it because I want to be somewhere in the next so many years like every other young, you know, early 20-person would. (...) But the reason I'm like this now, the reason I speak like this is purely because this is the product you have to be. You have to be someone who would happily work so hard. (...) And I think ultimately it's choice. It's absolute choice. (...) it is just a conveyer belt of individuals who wanna end up at a place, at a point in time. It's sad. I mean, I do know that. I'm physically aware of the problem of working time, flexitime, but hey, you know, I don't have a family. I don't have a mortgage. And I don't have like social constraints on me. I was interested, like, today because I knew this focus group was gonna happen. I thought it'd be a good chance to meet different people who do different things and that can make me think. I'm very much aware of the problems. But I honestly don't think I'm gonna

change them and I don't think anyone else is. I think it's just the norm like I said before. (...)

Frank When you say you wanna get somewhere, where's somewhere in terms of what is somewhere meaning? Is it a 40K plus job? Is [money?

Hritik It's not, it's not like, um. (...) it's all about dabbling in Law. It is about having as many fingers in as different pies just to make sure that, you know, when it gets to certain point in your life you've got a lot of things to do. You can start being flexible.

Megan Hmm. I think that's really important. Cos that's kind of why I went into teaching.

Hritik Absolutely.

Megan I don't want to be a teacher for my whole life. I like the idea of either doing a Psychology Masters and I'd really love to into Education Psychology. But at the moment, I'm really enjoying the teaching side. It's nice to have a few options (...) it's nice to have a bit of flexibility, not just in terms of your hours of work, but where you're gonna go with your job that you're not just this job you're going to do that till you retire.

Hritik Hmm.

Megan I think it's attractive for me anyway to have different things you can go into with the job. Different ways you can branch out and things.

Frank I think you can change your job if you want, but you have to accept that there's going to be some sort of decrease in the wage and then in life. Yes, if your idea in life is to get a certain wage, to have a certain lifestyle, then as I said, you're gonna have to work for it. (...) If you want to work all the hours God send for a 50K job or if you're willing to work a 34K job for a WLB, I think that that's what it comes down to.

Hritik So do you think it's more about, do you think that all, everything is always about sacrifice? You have that choice then?

Frank You do. You sacrifice one for the other. There's a balance. It says it's a balance. Balance is in the middle. You either sacrifice your work to have more play time as it were or you sacrifice your play time for more work time.

In this excerpt, Hritik gave a strongly articulated personal account within an interaction where other participants challenged his assumptions, thus encouraging him to defend or elaborate on his viewpoints. The moderator's choice of words 'conscious decision' in the question shaped how future life plans were discussed. Hritik shared that he had thought about the focus group in advance and was interested in what others would say, but he was also adamant that he would not change his views. Rather, he took this as an opportunity to rationalise his plans – the choice to study and work hard in order to attain a particular 'lifestyle'. The construction of 'lifestyle' in this context, "going somewhere in Hawaii and having four holidays a year", is based on glossy magazine ideals. He linked his personal account of his choice and aspirations to normative law student ideals, and to what he felt "every other young, you know, early 20-person would" want. This is an example of the multiple modalities at work when looking at how young adults talk about hypothetical situations in their future transition (Brannen et al., 2002).

Frank then challenged Hritik directly by asking what he meant by "wanna get

somewhere”, which encouraged Hritik to elaborate on other possibilities “when you get to a certain point in life”. The focus group became a site of tension between the two men and later, Hritik challenged Frank about whether he thought “everything is always about sacrifice”. Although the discourse of individual choice was constructed as normative by both, Frank presented a moralistic response to Hritik’s account of his future plans and anticipated choice. So while a shared assumption existed in the group that individual choice involves making a sacrifice and Frank’s final comment appears to reproduce the public discourse of WLB, the ways in which the participants talked about how this applied to them in terms of their future plans and expectations differed.

Furthermore, the debate between the two men reflects a gendered way of looking at future choices, performing hegemonic masculinity by talks of the choice “to work all the hours God send for a 50K job or if you’re willing to work a 34K job for a WLB”, and “You either sacrifice your work to have more play time as it were or you sacrifice your play time for more work time”. For these two men, the discourse of choice and WLB is about preference for salary, status, and lifestyle versus more free time, with no mention of how childcare costs or family needs could influence future choices in general terms or personally for them. Although Megan contributed to the discussion by agreeing with Hritik on the importance to be able to “dabble”, her thoughts on flexibility were not responded to, and the two men reverted to discussing the merits of “sacrifice” of salary versus “play time”.

## **2. Group developing consensus about changing life stages**

In the second excerpt, future family contexts are brought into the discussion of WLB which is led by a woman, Selena, a 25 year-old British-Pakistani final year PhD student. She had just taken up a post as a research associate, so was in a unique position in the group, having started full-time work. This recent event shaped her account and her construction of individual choice, in which she equated the notion of ‘lifestyle’ with flexible working hours:

Selena            I could have graduated in Psychology and done a Masters in something completely different (...) business or management (...) I knew that I wouldn’t fit in that lifestyle. I knew I would have to do 9 to 5. I wouldn’t able to hack it. I would just fall to bits. So straight away I made that decision (...) I’ve got a younger brother who’s also looking

for work. And I say to him 'choose now. Do you want to go for the lifestyle or do you want to go for the money? Cos you're gonna get one or the other. You can't really balance the two.' Cos he's doing IT at the moment. And I'm like 'right, you can either go for a wicked job that pays stacks! Or you can go for a job, which you're gonna have a better life.' You know, if you wanna have a family later on down the line, whatever. So I'm trying to get him to think about that now, because I think some point, you have to make that decision. If I went for the money, I wouldn't be in this position right now. You know, if I really did aim for big money and that was my priority, there's no way I'd be sat here saying 'yeah, I've got two days working from home. I can come in whenever.' No way! No way. So yeah, I think it is a conscious decision that you have to make, which lifestyle you wanna take or where you wanna go. And it's a shame that you have to do that, because why can't we have a bit of both?

Madeleine Except in an ideal world, maybe. [Laughs]

Selena Ideal world! [Laughs] Yeah! Definitely.

Moderator Do other people here agree with that? (...) do you think it comes down to making a choice between money or having the lifestyle that you want, you know, to work flexibly, that's what's important to you.

Yong Jian Can I say something? Right now, the discussion, um, has evolved into such a state that it seems like WLB is like a dichotomy. But then, something you said, um, about IT and your brother and all that. It seems like you can have a cake and eat it too, right? IT, they offer you stacks of money and, and, you know, like you said, um they give all kind of benefits in order to attract you. (...) so it is possible to have the best of both worlds [pause], for some people. (...)

Selena For some people, yeah. Yeah! [Short pause] I think.

Madeleine Isn't (...) the package that goes with IT is partly related to its field anyway? (...) which basically enables you to have a working system if a company chooses to offer it to its employees or its employees are demanding it. Whereas I think in other types of companies, it's not necessarily true. It needs the kind of infrastructure that can support, um, a more flexible sort of working scheme, which [short pause] maybe isn't as readily available as it is in IT.

Selena I think it's weird our generation is in this like kind of mid- limbo stage. I think gradually things will get better in the future, cos you know technology is evolving et cetera. (...) who knows, in the future maybe I can actually do a lecture sat in my bedroom (...) but at the moment, we're in that middle stage, where we wanna work, we earn our money, but we want our free time, too. And I think we're, things are changing, but we're still stuck in middle with the old values of maybe our parents. (...) I've seen, you know, my dad's worked Monday through to Saturday. And I only see him on Sundays. And it's like, there's no way my children are going to have a father (...) who they can't see on the weekends. (...)

Here, as in the first excerpt, the group referred to the concept of 'lifestyle' in a discussion about individual choice, but constructed it differently to Hritik's version of "four holidays a year". We see how focus groups can provide a link between the individual account and the cohort-wide experience at a specific life course transition. Selena's construction of the individual choice debate was shaped by her recent transition into employment, including her decision to go into academia instead of the private sector. Her account implied a degree of agency and choice on her part – like the men in the first excerpt; a choice between "lifestyle" or "money". However, unlike those men, Selena's account included the needs of children and family in relation to future working hours and lifestyle.

The normative assumption of sacrifice in WLB, made explicit in the first excerpt, and implicit in Selena's talk, was challenged by Yong Jian, a 25 year-old Chinese-Singaporean MSc student. He questioned the discourse of dichotomy and drew upon the newspaper article given out at the start of the focus group, which reported how a group of IT graduates were able to "have the best of both worlds" by being highly paid and able to work flexibly. This led to a comparison of generations. Selena talked about her generation being in a middle stage between the previous generation of traditional parents who value hard work and financial security and a future generation of more flexible, technologically enabled workers. Her construction of being in the "mid-limbo stage" provides an example of how a focus group can capture accounts that connect the different elements of the life course: location in time and place, the timing of life transition, and social relations (specifically, the influence of parental experiences of WLB). In addition, this discourse signals a feeling of being in 'mid-limbo' in terms of their life course phase, between 'studenthood' and adulthood, where it is difficult to talk more concretely about future children and family life at this point in time and place. This reflects Brannen and Nilsen's (2005) future orientation of 'model of adaptability', where young adults subscribe to notions of individual choice and talk about taking one step at a time and different strategies for ensuring that they are able to adapt to and cope with a changing future.

### ***3. Focus group as opportunity to consider a new aspect of a life course transition***

In the third excerpt, we see how marriage and partnership were difficult topics to discuss concretely in a focus group context. In this focus group, six out of eight participants (five Asian students and one British) took part in the discussion. All six were in their 20s and studying for a Masters degree. Only one was married (Titho).

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| Moderator<br>Nancy | Well, this brings me to my next question: would you put a relationship before a job? I think for me definitely work is not as important as like being happy in the rest of your life. And I think (...) if I decided to stick with a job that would cost me a lot in my personal life, then I'd probably end up enjoying it less (...) you'd just be reminded that yeah, it cost you so much. |
| Titho              | I think, to be honest, it's a little more theoretical than practical, because you need to reach a compromise situation if it comes at all in your way. You can't say "OK, I'll choose the job" or "I'll choose the relationship". You can't do that, because you need the job to sustain. You need the relationship as well. So I think there needs to be a compromise if at all it comes in. |



Moderator OK. Here's a different way of asking, if you had to move away from someone you were close to in order to get work, in order to basically start a new job, would you do it or not?

Leila Why? Can I ask you why this is seen as a conflict?

Moderator You don't see why that might be?

Ita It can be quite a good thing.

Leila [Laughs] Why not we can balance it?

Ita And if it's like a short term like maybe six months or one year, you know, yeah, maybe you do that. I know some people who do as well. You know, they went here to study. They leave their wives and kids at home for one year or two years. Of course, they visit them after six months every year. And that's not a problem. But if it's more a permanent base, then, obviously you have to reach compromise.

Moderator Like you were saying this is hypothetical and it might be difficult what your answer will be at the time until it happens to you. (...) Would you move away from someone – from your wife or your girlfriend or your husband or your boyfriend in order to get work?

Rose It's just how you work it out between you.

Moderator Uh huh. OK. Right. What about to get a promotion or a better job? It's a slightly different scenario. First, the question was about would you do it in order to just get a job. And now, would you do it if you were gonna get a better position or a promotion, would you move away?

Leila It really depends [laughs]. It's quite hard. It's right. But I mean, I would probably discuss it with my boyfriend or husband and then make my decision.

Moderator OK. Well, I'm thinking of my own personal experience and I'm thinking would it make a difference if you've been with this person for let's say a year. Would it be any different if you've been with this person for 5 years? Do you think the length of the relationship makes a difference and your tendency to move away or not?

Titho I think if that's 1 year if you don't have kids, maybe 5 years you don't have kids, it doesn't matter [laughs].

[Laughter]

Traveller When you say 1 year or 5 years, I'm thinking along the lines of being single as in boyfriend girlfriend stage. Uh, if you're married, for me, it doesn't matter.

Ita It doesn't matter.

[Laughter]

Moderator OK. What does everyone else think? That it doesn't make difference if you're married to this person or not?

Nancy I don't think that marriage will affect it for me. I mean, I don't really think that I'll necessarily get married. But that doesn't alter your commitment to the one person, so. And again, you know, it's hard to gauge, um, the importance of the relationship to you in terms of the timescale. It's quite hard, so.

In this excerpt, the moderator framed the issue of work and partnership as a potential individual choice dilemma. A discussion emerged that flowed from normative accounts to practical ones. In terms of the three types of modalities, personal accounts were missing. Although participants jointly constructed a lively and humorous discussion, it is notable that no one, including the married Titho, referred to their own personal relationships. Participants' contributions were mostly hypothetical, apart from Nancy, a British woman, who stated that for her, marriage was not an important marker of commitment. The other participants involved in this discussion were from Asian countries and perhaps were reluctant to speak openly about being in relationships at this point in time, given that they were in Britain to

study. After this focus group, the moderator reflected on her own experience of growing up in an Asian family in trying to understand why personal accounts were largely absent. For many young Asian people, education is priority and cultural norms dictate that this must be completed before finding love and settling down. This may have been the case for this group of Asian students and this normative value may have stopped them from going into the specifics of their own lives. The moderator had to probe the participants more on this topic than on other less personal topics related to future work plans.

## **Conclusion**

In these excerpts we have used concepts from Julia's focus group and life course methodological work to consider how young adults' talk about their individual choices and expectations for future work and family become elaborated on, modified and amended in the peer group context. Notions of individual choice, especially the dichotomy of well-paid but temporally demanding work versus "play time", become modified by the group sharing experiences and views. Individualised choices are shifted into a generational or cohort-based experience. So in Excerpt 1, a dominant participant's description of the reasons behind his career choices was challenged, elaborated on and some of the assumptions and values were made explicit. In Excerpt 2, students talked about their generation being in limbo between more traditional parents expecting hard work and future workers. In Excerpt 3, individual disinclination to talk about future hypothetical partnerships became normalised in this context of mainly Asian young postgraduate students, expected to study hard before forming long-term relationships.

Brannen and Nilsen (2002) noted that young adults talked about being in the process of acquiring skills to be 'proper' adults at some future point, and also observed that children of immigrants in their cross-national study exhibited a specific approach to the future. We can see similar themes emerging in these data. The participants, who were all in their 20s, were in an extended transition to adulthood and viewed themselves as not yet in their adult roles. The specific experiences of having Asian families and being in a foreign country to study also clearly affected participants' ways of talking about future relationships and jobs. Shared experiences

in the focus group helped to highlight this.

The peer interactions in these groups – agreements, requests for elaboration, and challenges (direct and indirect) resulted in participants moving between modalities: individual experiences, normative accounts, practical accounts, and shared experiences, and reflecting collaboratively on this. This illustrated the ways that individuals' choices were made within a specific social and temporal context. The focus group excerpts highlight the language used, the shared assumptions of this peer cohort group and processes of disagreement and contention rooted in both individual experiences and socio-cultural expectations.

The analysis demonstrates how the concept of individual choice is talked about by this cohort of young adults. While there was in general a consensus about people having individual choices about future work and family, this was elaborated in the notion of sacrifice. Moreover, choice and sacrifice were linked to a recurring theme of desired lifestyle, which was constructed in various ways. Despite the multi-national and multi-ethnic composition of the groups, there were many shared assumptions about choice and sacrifice and about how their perspectives would likely change as they consider these issues from the vantage point of later life.

A limitation of using the focus group method within a life course approach is participants dominated discussion. Gender was a critical aspect of diversity in the groups, with women participants being much more likely to bring consideration of future parenthood into debates. We saw in Excerpt 1 two men with opposing views debating what they valued and hoped for in the future, while they showed only minimal interest in the woman participant's opinion. While the 'mixed groups' provided the opportunity for participants to share, reflect, and debate on a range of perspectives from young people of diverse cultural and national backgrounds, they may also lead to unequal power dynamics which preclude some people giving their views.

Nevertheless, a focus group approach can illuminate contextual, cohort-specific influences by highlighting the nature of discussions, shared assumptions and issues of contention. Additionally, participation in a focus group may enable individuals to

locate and consider these influences, and provide a way of reflecting on the way an individual life course is shaped by external factors.

While focus groups may not be suitable for all groups or all life course topics, we suggest that they are a powerful way of considering some of the key concepts in life course research. We were particularly interested in group orientations and the social context of choices – the “dual epistemology of agency and structure” (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002: 532). Much life course research draws on social and temporal theory and knowledge to make sense of individual interview talk. Building on the frameworks provided by Julia and her colleagues, we argue here that by bringing the talk into a peer group context, participants can more actively engage in locating their ‘individual choices’ within structural constraints.

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